

"Téléhone Pour Black Panthers,"
sliced phone on white
wood panel, 1970.



ARMAN

*A museum in the South of France pays tribute to the
Franco-American artist, the "archeologist of our times"*

IN

BY JÉRÔME NEUTRES

VENCE

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In the beautiful Provence town of Vence, where Matisse painted his chapel and Chagall most of his masterpieces, the Musée de Vence-Fondation Emile Hugues is hosting a tribute to the Franco-American artist Arman (Nice 1928-New York 2005), curated by our contributor Jérôme Neutres, a member of the Arman Committee. The exhibition, on view until December 15, was conceived after the public-space installation of a bronze sculpture of a destroyed piano, and focuses on Arman as a pioneer of recycling, and the inventor of garbage as a medium of fine art.

Donated by Arman to his hometown, the spectacular sculpture-fountain "Accord Parfait" (Major Chord), installed in front of the Musée de Vence, forms both the starting-point and the focus of this exhibition. This masterpiece from the series Atlantis, rare visions from an imaginary shipwreck, is the pretext for returning to the basis of Arman's art. Highlighting the artist's idea of an "archaeology of the future," "Accord Parfait" pays the ultimate tribute to odds and ends, by transforming debris into archaeological treasure. The visionary creator of the "Dustbins" (which can be found in the permanent collections of major modern and Contemporary art museums around the world, from MoMa to Pompidou), turned everyday objects into



A portrait of Arman by Jean Ferrero.

ARMAN'S ART STARTS WHEN OBJECTS BREAK DOWN. HE GIVES THEM A NEW FUNCTIONALITY, AND IN SO DOING SHOWS HOW ART CAN PROPOSE ANOTHER USE OF THE WORLD

an artistic medium, to help us analyze the materialistic culture of our industrial civilization. Stripped of their everyday function, in the hands of Arman decrepit ordinary objects become poetic artefacts, a tangible account of the history of our consumer society — well before the environmental impact of industrial waste became a mainstream issue.

Even more relevant today than when it was created, all of Arman's work is a cry of rage. It's an act of defiance against mass consumerism, and a demonstration that art can provide another way to make use of the world. "Cutting a violin into thin slices is an outrageous thing to do," explained the artist in an interview published in *l'Oeil* in 1963. "The application of a technique or a method which one could apply to a sausage but which is not intended for a violin causes a distortion of thought, a change which, naturally, produces a psychological effect." "Accord parfait" has a paradoxical

title, as of course this piano can no longer play any harmony other than the message that the artist has conferred on it. Destruction establishes itself as the basis of creation, akin to the myth of Atlantis.

Under this generic title, in reference to the mythical sunken island, Arman began in 1991 a series of works in bronze, with a special patina that gives to his works the effect of archaeological shipwrecks salvaged from beneath the sea. These fictional vestiges symbolizing the civilization of the 20th century — the era of the cult of speed, of consumerism and of creativity — foretell a programmed extinction, through their association with the Atlantis myth. This new technique in sculpture ultimately forms a new stage in the aesthetic metamorphosis of our discarded objects, which constitutes one of the cornerstones of the art of Arman. "I hibernated in my future and from the depths of our



Installation view of the Arman exhibition at the Musée de Vence.

unconscious I salvaged the remains of a new Atlantis," wrote the artist, paraphrasing Apollinaire, "My staging of objects continues, this time with more than ever the appropriation of the traces of time; while they were created in Antiquity as new as Cadillacs; in China, Egypt, or Greece, what we love is the patina of the centuries which has unified everything from the gilded, from stone to the green of bronze. From here, we can contemplate the archaeology of the future."

This exhibition, a rare tribute to an artist who is not shown enough by museums considering his importance in modern art history, could be entitled "Metamorphosis of waste." All the works displayed here represent objects that don't work anymore. A violin, a sofa, an armchair, a cupboard, a cello, a helmet, a teapot... all these objects are broken, burnt, destroyed by the artist himself. Arman's art starts when objects break down. He gives them a new functionality, and in so doing shows how art can propose another use of the world. Arman confers to the least interesting object, namely the garbage, the noblest image – the status of a work of art. This plastic approach echoes Jean Genet's literary one. Very popular among the artists of his time, Genet published notably "Alberto Giacometti's Studio" in 1958,

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Installation view of the Arman exhibition at the Musée de Vence.



"Accord Parfait" (Major Chord) installed in front of the Musée de Vence.

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“FOR A LONG TIME, I WAS SCARED BY THE FACT THAT ONE OF THE MOST VISIBLE MATERIAL RESULTS OF IT IS THE INVASION OF OUR WORLD BY WASTE AND OTHER STRANGE REFUSES”

exactly during Arman’s artistic training. In this book, Genet theorized his intention to offer the most exquisite words to the vilest realities. In his own art, Arman puts some sense back into things that have lost it: what was a broken violin before becoming an Arman work? “As a witness of my own society, I always cared about the pseudo-biological cycle of production, consumption and destruction,” explained Arman. “For a long time, I was scared by the fact that one of the most visible material results of it is the invasion of our world by waste and other strange refuses.”

By staging the disorder of the world, the artist gives it meaning and helps us make sense of it. Arman belongs to a history of artistic modernity that draws its inspiration and its models from the reign of the “mechanical life,” as Fernand Léger said. This style was initiated by artists such as Duchamp and Brancusi, who took up the industrial iconography to distort it. In 1912, these three geniuses visited the Grand Palais Aerial Locomotion Fair. Confronted with the beautiful design of the planes, they stated that “painting was over.” Who

could do better than this helix? Arman explained (probably not by chance) a similar primal scene of his youth. “My father took me to an international exhibition which showed cut-in-half cameras and motors,” he said. “This revelation of the inner part fascinated me. For me, they were the guts of the objects.”

While other sculptors create with clay or wood, Arman made manufactured objects the base material of his art. In a moving foreword of the exhibition catalog, his artist-friend Bernar Venet points out why we have “to recognize Arman’s status as a forerunner”: “Arman was the first artist to exploit more radically than anybody else the possibilities of the object,” he wrote, “He is to the object what Jackson Pollock was to painting. The body is committed and its movements in and beside the work end up generating it and defining its identity.” He is a forerunner who inspired so many Contemporary artists, from Damian Hirst to Ai Weiwei and Subodh Gupta. It is time to recognize the importance of the legacy of the artist-archeologist of our times.MP

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